

SPECTATORS' CHARACTERISTICS, EXPENSES AND FEELINGS. COMPARISON BETWEEN FOUR TOP LEVEL SPORT EVENTS ORGANIZED IN THE REGION OF LIÈGE

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Sport events represent a means to attract a good many people in a region. We make a distinction between mass sport allowing everyone to participate and top level sport in which few top athletes compete in front of thousands of spectators. According to Dubouchaud (1994), elite sport stimulates mass sport, while top athletes of tomorrow are recruited from mass sport competitors. From a social and economic point of view, each sport event involves practical implications which are worth studying. Among the factors affecting attendance of sport events figure notably loyalty (Ferrand & Pages, 1996), game attrait (Schofield, 1983), economic aspects, socio-economic characteristics of spectators and services offered to them (Greenstein & Marcum, 1981; Zhang, Pease, Hui & Michaud, 1995). This study was part of a larger research program subsidized by the "Fonds Spécial de Recherche" of the University of Liège and designed to assess economic repercussions of sport events in the region of Liège, including the European Football Championship in 2000. Its aim was quadruple: (1) to develop and test a method of collecting data about spectators attending top level sport events organized in the region of Liège; (2) to identify their characteristics and customs; (3) to generate practical implications liable to improve economic impact of such sport events; and (4) to assess the appropriateness of such a method for collecting data in the context of Euro 2000.

A team of researchers collected data from one thousand of spectators attending 10 sport events organized within the region of Liège during the year 1999. Spectators were randomly submitted to an individual interview. This one lasted about 10 minutes and relied on a standard interview guide. Questions were about four main themes: (1) socio-economic characteristics of spectators; (2) spending; (3) opinion about the sport event; and (4) opinion about the region. Answers were written in a form by the researchers, then coded and analysed by several members of the research team. Inter-analyst reliability was over 85%. Data was processed with SPSS software. This paper focused on four top level sport events: two soccer matches, (1) Belgium/Egypt and (2) Belgium/Morocco; one cycle race, (3) "Liège-Bastogne-Liège"; and one motor race, (4) "Proximus 24 Hours of Spa". The number of interviewed spectators respectively amounted to 158, 142, 107 and 73.

Because of the heterogeneity of the topic, discussion will be presented simultaneously with results. Analysis of socio-economic characteristics of spectators showed that sport events attendance remains a youngster and man affair. Indeed, 63.8% of spectators were between 19 and 39 while 77.7% were men. However, we have to put such findings into perspective by considering the nature of the focused sport events and by integrating sport events into the wider and wider choice of leisure activities. Social issues were underlined by the great proportion of spectators attending events with some friends or family (85.2%). The origin of spectators differed according to the nature of events: audience around the finishing line of "Liège-Bastogne-Liège" was mainly regional, while most spectators of "Proximus 24 Hours of Spa" came from other areas. Car appeared as the most privileged means of transport (82.8%), implying the need for organizing signposting, car park and free flow before and after the event. Except for the last event, few spectators spent time on visiting the region. 93.7% arrived on the site within two hours before the event and 85.9% intended to leave within two hours after. Such characteristics allow us to consider that these sport events should have few

direct economic repercussions for the local market. In fact, average spectators' expenses respectively amounted to 10.04, 6.74, 14.43 and 37.78 €. Calculation of the average admission fee paid by the spectators tended to validate their answers: the amounts corresponded quite faithfully to the official admission fee for each event. The low amount of travelling expenses may be explained by (1) the low distance covered by most spectators (64.5% lived under a perimeter of 40 km) and (2) the high rate of spectators sharing a car with their friends or family. Except for the motor race, spectators spent more money on the event site than in the surrounding area. Confirming previous discussion, such findings were convenient with the time spent in addition to the duration of the event. Drink played a great part in spectators' expenses, unlike merchandising. Organizers should take more care to the sale of such by-products, which may represent a significant source of revenue. According to the low rate of satisfaction at the end of the match Belgium/Egypt, general opinion about sport events seemed to depend on the result of the competition and the quality of the sport performance. Among the positive factors related to the four events, a good atmosphere was the most frequently mentioned (32.6%). Spectators appeared to be particularly sensitive to music, conviviality, family and fair feeling. On the contrary, there was few agreement between them on the negative factors related to each event. Organizers should be receptive to criticism, but in the same time aware of the utopia which consists in trying to satisfy everybody. Finally, general opinion of spectators about the region of Liège was mainly favourable, whether they lived there (83.6%) or not (89.1%). Welcome characteristic of the residents represented the most significant factor contributing to this good image (27.9%). Besides, most of non-resident spectators intended to come again in the region (78.1%), mainly for attending other sport events (57%). Such findings tended to show that organization of such events may indirectly contribute to the socio-economic development of the region by presenting a good image of Liège and the surrounding area.

In conclusion, this study succeeded in developing a reliable method and improving knowledge about spectators' behaviours. It generated practical implications for local stakeholders and organizers, and predicted successful developments for assessment of economic repercussions of Euro 2000. Results obtained at the end of this major international sport event will be the object of imminent publications.

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